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ABSTRACT

Research on residential relocation has reported mixed findings on the impact of such relocation on psychological well-being. Theorists have postulated that one's perception of an event will influence one's response to it and that response will influence the outcome. This study examined older persons' reactions to a residential relocation based on this cognitive phenomenological theory. Subjects were 75 white, upper middle class persons who were 75 years of age or older and who had recently moved from one level of independence to another within a church-related retirement center. Subjects completed the revised Ways of Coping Checklist, the Life Satisfaction Index-Z, and investigator-designed questions to obtain data on conditioning variables and perceptions of the relocation. The results revealed that 80% of respondents perceived their relocation as a somewhat or very significant event in their lives. Most believed they had somewhat to very much control over whether to make the move and over what was happening in their lives at the time of the interview. Most of the conditioning variables examined seemed to have little influence on perceptions, coping strategies, and life satisfaction; however, the degree of independence associated with the new residence and distance from family members did show evidence of influencing some perceptions and some coping strategies. Perceptions of the relocation seemed to relate only to the specific coping strategies of wishful thinking and avoidance. Other findings suggest that, although perceptions did not relate to most of the coping strategies, they may have a direct relationship to life satisfaction. (NB)

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Coping Strategies and Life Satisfaction of Older Persons in Residential Relocation

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Coping Strategies and Life Satisfaction of Older Persons in Residential Relocation

Residential relocation (RR) is one of the common transitions experienced by many older persons (George 1980). Mixed findings have been reported regarding the impact of this potentially stressful event on psychological well-being (e.g., Borup, 1982; Brand & Smith, 1974; Croke, 1986; Sherwood, Morris & Gutkin, 1986). These inconsistent findings may be due to mediating variables. Theorists have postulated that one's perception of an event will influence one's response to it (Lazarus & DeLongis, 1983; Lowenthal & Chirboga, 1973), and that the response will influence the outcome (Lazarus, 1966; 1974). The purpose of this study was to examine older persons' reactions to an RR based on this cognitive phenomenological theory.

An adaptation of the House model of social stress (1974) was used as a guide in developing research questions (see Figure 1). This model attempts to demonstrate the potentially complex interaction among variables associated with a stressful event. Solid lines represent hypothesized relationships while dotted lines represent mediating effects.

Insert Figure 1 about here

Based on this model, the following research questions were addressed.

RQ1: How do older persons perceive the RR?

RQ2: What coping strategies are used to deal with the RR?

RQ3: Is there a relationship between perceptions of and coping strategies used to deal with the RR?

RQ4: Is there a relationship between conditioning variables and perceptions?

RQ5: Is there a relationship between conditioning variables and coping strategies?

RQ6: Is there a relationship between conditioning variables, perceptions, or coping strategies and life satisfaction?

At a later date, the interaction among conditioning variables, perceptions, coping strategies and life satisfaction will be examined.

Method

Subjects

Subjects were 75 older (mean age = 83), white, upper middle class persons who had recently made an RR from one level of independence to another within a church-related retirement center. An RR was defined as a permanent move to a new room, apartment, or villa that involved a change from one level of independence to another. Within the retirement center were six levels of independence on a continuum from skilled nursing to intermediate care, home for the aged, independent living rooms, independent apartments, and independent villas.

Instruments

The revised Ways of Coping Checklist (WCCL) (Vitaliano, Maiuro, Russo & Becker, 1987; Vitaliano, Russo, Carr, Maiuro & Becker, 1985), the Life Satisfaction Index-Z (LSI-Z) (Wood, Wylie & Shaefor, 1969), and investigator-designed questions to obtain data on conditioning variables and perceptions of the RR were used as a format for structured interviews. The WCCL measured five coping strategies: Problem Focused (PF), Seeks Social Support (SS), Blamed Self (BS), Wishful Thinking (WF), and Avoidance (AV). The LSI-Z yielded a single score. Conditioning variables included demographic data and information regarding the degree of independence associated with the new residence, magnitude of the move, amount of time since the move, other changes in the last two months, distance lived from spouse and other family members, and family involvement. Perceptions of the relocation included significance, disruption, control over whether or not to make the move, control over present circumstances, degree of stress, and quality of the move.

Summary of Findings

Data were analyzed using means, standard deviations, frequency tables, Spearman rank correlation coefficients for ordinal variables, and analysis of variance for nominal variables. Only relationships at $p < .01$ were considered to be significant. Multiple regression analysis will be used to examine the interaction among variables, but has not been conducted.

Most of the subjects (80%) perceived the RR as a somewhat or very significant event in their lives. The majority believed they had somewhat to very much control over whether to make the move (72%) and over what was happening in their lives at the time of the interview (73%). Broad ranges of responses were obtained regarding their perceptions of the disruptive and stressful natures of the RR. The majority (57%) felt that the move was good to very good, while 37% felt that it was both good and bad.

None of the five coping strategies were used to a great degree, but PF and SS were used more than BS, WT, and AV. Comments from subjects suggested that those who felt the RR was a good experience believed that many of the strategies listed in the revised WCCL did not apply to their situation.

Neither PF, SS, nor BS related to any of the perceptions. Significant relationships were found between WT and several perceptions ($p < .005$). Subjects who used more WT perceived the RR as more disruptive and stressful and as being a worse experience than subjects who used less WT. They also perceived that they had less control over whether to make the RR and over present circumstances than those using less WT. AV was also significantly related to some perceptions ($p < .01$). Those who used more AV perceived the RR as more disruptive and a worse experience than those who used less AV. The AV users indicated that they had less control of present circumstances than those who used this strategy less.

Many of the conditioning variables were not related to any of the perceptions (age, gender, religion, marital status, magnitude of the move, amount of time since the move, other changes in the past two months, distance spouse lived from the subject, and number of visits from the family). The degree of independence offered by the living unit to which individuals moved was significantly related to three of the six perceptions ($p < .005$). Those living more independently perceived that they had greater degree of control over whether to make the RR and over the present, and felt better about the quality of the move than those living less independently. Education related significantly to only one perception ($p < .01$). Those with higher educational levels perceived the RR as more significant than those with lower educational levels. The subjective statement regarding whether family members lived near to subjects was significantly related to four of the six perceptions ($p < .01$). Those who indicated that they had family who lived near them perceived the RR to be less disruptive and stressful, felt better about the quality of the move, and indicated that they had a greater degree of control over whether or not to make the move than those who said their family did not live near them. Similarly, actual distance the family (spouse, children, etc.) lived from subjects related significantly to three of the perceptions at $p < .01$. Those with relatives living fewer miles from them perceived the move to be less disruptive and stressful and that they had more control over whether to make the RR than those whose relatives lived greater distances from them.

Few conditioning variables related to any of the coping strategies. None related to PF or BS, and only one related to SS ($p < .01$). Those who had other changes in the past two months used more SS than those who had not had other changes. Only one conditioning variable was related to PF. Degree of independence associated with the new residence was negatively associated with WT and AV ($p < .0001$). Those who lived in

units offering less independence used more WT and AV than those in more independent situations. The subjective opinion of whether family lived near them was negatively associated with AV ($p < .005$), and the actual distance from family (spouse, children, etc.) was positively associated with AV ($p < .01$). Thus, those whose families lived farther away from them used more AV than those whose families lived near. Number of visits from family during the past month was negatively associated with AV. That is, those whose families visited them tended to use less AV. Neither age, gender, religion, education, marital status, magnitude of the move, amount of time since the RR, nor distance lived from spouse related significantly to any of the strategies.

Most perceptions of the RR related significantly to life satisfaction. Those with higher LSI-Z scores perceived they had greater control over the move and over the present circumstances ($p < .0001$), felt better about the RR ($p < .0001$), and believed the move was less disruptive ($p < .01$) and less stressful ($p < .005$) than those with lower LSI-Z scores. The perception of the degree of significance of the move did not relate to the LSI-Z.

Only two of the five coping strategies related significantly to life satisfaction ($p < .0001$). Those who used more WT and AV had lower LSI-Z scores. Neither PF, SS, nor BS related to the LSI-Z.

Only two of the conditioning variables related significantly to the LSI-Z. Those who moved to more independent settings felt a greater sense of life satisfaction than those who were in less independent units ($p < .0001$). Older persons felt less life satisfaction ($p < .01$). No other conditioning variables (gender, religion, education, marital status, magnitude of the move, difference in time between the RR and the interview, other changes in the past two months, distance lived from mate, perceived distance from family members, actual distance from family members, number of visits from family) related to life satisfaction.

These findings only partially supported the model/theory on which the research questions were based. Most of the conditioning variables examined in this study seemed to have little influence on perceptions, coping strategies, and life satisfaction; however, the degree of independence associated with the new residence and distance (perceived and actual) from family members did show evidence of influencing some perceptions and some coping strategies. Perceptions of the RR seemed to relate only to specific coping strategies (WT and AV) with WT relating stronger and more often with perceptions. Relationships of conditioning variables, perceptions, and coping strategies to life satisfaction showed that only two of thirteen conditioning variables were significantly related to the LSI-Z; only two of five coping strategies related to the LSI-Z; but five of the six perceptions related significantly to the LSI-Z. This suggests that although perceptions do not relate to most of

the coping strategies, they may have a direct relationship to life satisfaction. This relationship might be demonstrated in the adapted House model (1974) as a solid line directly from perceptions to outcome (LSI-Z). The investigator plans to examine the interaction among variables to gain a clearer picture of the potentially complex nature of the reaction to RR.

Life satisfaction was identified in this study as the dependent variable and was placed in the outcome box of the adapted House model (see Figure 1). Since the LSI-Z was administered at the same time as the other instruments, however, it may or may not truly be considered a dependent variable. For example, an individual who has a higher degree of life satisfaction may typically use fewer WT or AV strategies or typically view events as less disruptive and less stressful. Although these explanations are not possible to examine in this investigation, a longitudinal study would help determine the impact of the variables of interest on life satisfaction. Such a follow-up of subjects is planned for the next two years.

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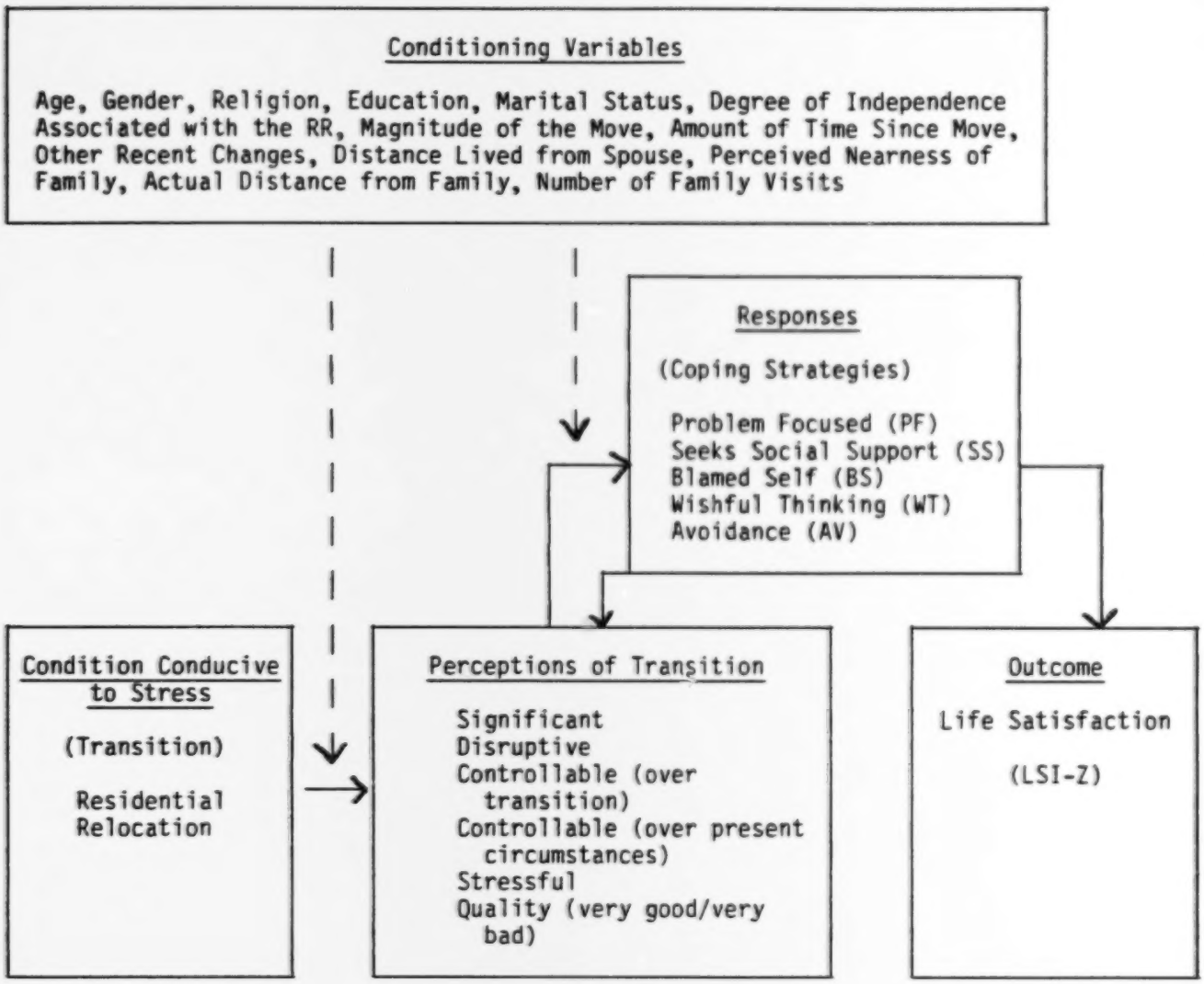
Figure 1

Model of Adaptation to Adult Transitions Applied to Residential Relocation of Older Persons


Conditioning Variables
Age, Gender, Religion, Education, Marital Status, Degree of Independence Associated with the RR, Magnitude of the Move, Amount of Time Since Move, Other Recent Changes, Distance Lived from Spouse, Perceived Nearness of Family, Actual Distance from Family, Number of Family Visits
Responses
(Coping Strategies)
Problem Focused (PF)
Seeks Social Support (SS)
Blamed Self (BS)
Wishful Thinking (WT)
Avoidance (AV)
Condition Conducive to Stress
(Transition)
Residential Relocation
Perceptions of Transition
Significant
Disruptive
Controllable (over transition)
Controllable (over present circumstances)
Stressful
Quality (very good/very bad)
Outcome
Life Satisfaction
(LSI-Z)

Adaptation from House's Social Stress Model (House, 1974)